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QUESTION OF A CONVENTION ON THE
RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement submitted by the Women's International
Democratic Federation, a non-governmental organization
in category I consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following communication, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[16 February 1979]

The Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) considers that the situation of children is a crucial social problem in many countries.

The solution of the problems associated with the present-day situation of children, like that of other social problems, depends on the execution of profound social and economic reforms aimed at putting an end to colonialism, neo-colonialism, fascism, racism and apartheid, and to all forms of economic and social oppression and exploitation.

The safeguarding of peace is the first condition for guaranteeing all children the right to life, health, well-being and harmonious physical and mental development.

That is why WIDF, which has been striving tirelessly for the rights of women and children since its foundation over 30 years ago, wholeheartedly supports the Final Document adopted by the special session of the United Nations General Assembly, the resolutions of the thirty-third session of the General Assembly, and the other proposals and initiatives aimed at reducing international tension, halting the arms race, and promoting disarmament and the use of the sums earmarked for military purposes to improve children's lives and to foster progress in the fields of health, education and training on behalf of the rising generation.

The protection of the rights of the child entails the protection of rights which are an integral part of the over-all body of human rights. Those rights are stated in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic and Cultural Rights.

We would also mention the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict in the struggle for peace, self-determination, national liberation and independence, a document of which WIDF was the initial sponsor.

The Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations on 20 November 1959 is an international instrument of great importance as regards the rights of the child. Nevertheless, despite the existence of all these international instruments, there is in many countries no effective protection of children.

Information in the possession of WIDF, and the results of the various seminars, symposiums, conferences and the like on the well-being of children, provide clear evidence of the alarming situation of millions of children in numerous countries in all continents.

In many countries, children are exposed to cruel suffering. Poverty, disease, hunger, the lack of educational opportunities, the inadequacy of medical care and other social evils threaten their existence.

We wish to express our deep concern at the tragic situation of children in the countries where the democratic freedoms are suppressed and racial discrimination and apartheid constitute the basis of government policy, in the countries whose peoples are struggling for their national independence and freedom against colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Many children are deprived of their legitimate rights to education, a proper upbringing and decent living conditions.

A study made by ILO shows that, in the developed capitalist countries, children in the age range from 10 to 14 years represent 4 per cent of the labour force. Many young people find no employment when they leave school. The consequences of that situation are juvenile delinquency, drug addiction, prostitution and vagrancy.

The lack of pre-natal, post-natal and general child care, the malnutrition and the living and working conditions to which millions of children in the world are exposed, and illiteracy are the subject of concern and of studies by WHO, FAO, ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, and other United Nations agencies. The phenomena in question are clearly reflected in the documents and statistics of those institutions.

As the spokesmen of the masses, the NGOs, too, work for the well-being of children, each in its own way. WIDF has never failed to strive for the happiness of the world's children. That is why it greeted with enthusiasm the elaboration and adoption twenty years ago of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

WIDF welcomed the emphasis placed by the United Nations International Development Strategy, in clear, albeit general, terms, on the need to protect children and to integrate youth in the development process.

In 1975, International Women's Year, which launched the United Nations Decade for Women under the slogan "Equality, Development and Peace", highlighted the links that exist between child welfare and the status of women.

The World Congress for the International Women's Year, held in Berlin (German Democratic Republic), as a very broad forum of public opinion, and women from all over the world reaffirmed the need for concerted action for the well-being of the child. The Congress stressed the urgency of transforming the Declaration of the Rights of the Child into a convention.

It seemed to WIDF that some kind of pilot action was absolutely necessary if the principles stated in that Declaration were to be implemented. That is why it was among the first groups of NGOs to propose to the Economic and Social Council the celebration of a year of the child in order to unite governmental and non-governmental forces for the well-being of children.

WIDF is making great efforts for the achievement of the objectives of the International Year of the Child, and is participating actively in the work of the international Committee for the United Nations Decade for Women and, in particular, in the preparations for the world conference on a safe and peaceful future for all children to be held, at the non-governmental level, in Moscow in the autumn of 1979.

WIDF is of the view that the protection of the child and the resources allocated to that end should not be limited to voluntary efforts, and that the involvement of Governments is also necessary. That involvement should be backed up by national laws and international legal instruments.

On the national level, Governments should carry out development programmes on behalf of children.

The protection of children can be ensured only if Governments take essential economic and social measures. The laws and constitutions and the relevant enacting measures in countries with a socialist system are proof of that. The laws are binding on society as a whole and on the State, and all the measures necessary for the protection of the child and for his well-being have been taken.

The countries which have thrown off the yoke of colonialism and have chosen a course of independent development are implementing broad social and economic reforms aimed at overcoming the economic backwardness, the hunger, and the disease and illiteracy that affect children most of all.

These countries are carrying out a series of programmes which constitute an integral part of their development effort and have as their aim the improvement of the situation of children.

In view of the foregoing and of the fact that 1979 has been proclaimed the International Year of the Child, WIDF urges the Commission on Human Rights to take the necessary measures to ensure that the international convention on the rights of the child which is being discussed at the present session is completed and adopted for submission to the General Assembly.

WIDF agrees with all the articles of the draft convention on the rights of the child, which reflect in their entirety the principles laid down in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child of 1959. The convention will be an effective legal instrument for the realization of the rights of the child.

WIDF particularly welcomes article X of the draft convention, which declares:

"The child shall be protected from practices which may foster racial, religious or any other form of discrimination. He shall be brought up in a spirit of understanding, tolerance, friendship among peoples, peace and universal brotherhood, and in full consciousness that his energy and talents should be devoted to the service of his fellow men".

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It wishes to propose that in drafting the convention the United Nations Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children should be taken into account. It therefore suggests the addition to the text of the convention of articles on the protection of the children of migrant workers and of the children of refugees.

WIDF herewith expresses its firm conviction that this convention, which, after ratification by States, will have legal force, could make an appreciable contribution towards improving the situation of the child in many countries.